

The Prize-Winning Town Slogan
James 2:1-10, 14-17

Cathy and I frequently drive to Athens to pick up our grandson Cash. One of Cash's parents brings him up from Roswell, and we meet at a McDonald's just outside Athens. You probably know the route we take through Abbeville, Calhoun Falls, and Elberton. Just past Elberton is a little town called Carlton. On both approaches to Carlton stand granite signs bearing the town name and the town slogan. Under the word Carlton is this phrase: *"Where Everybody's Somebody."*

Almost every town or city has a welcoming sign and some kind of statement about itself. I enjoy driving through rural areas and seeing town signs and church signs. I have a little mental game. When I see an unusual slogan, I like to speculate about how it came to be—who might have coined it, the kind of late-night meeting where it was discussed, who opposed it, and so forth. I also wonder why towns, churches, and other institutions think they need a slogan.

But Carlton's slogan affects me in a different way. I don't think of it in a humorous or cynical way. I let my imagination go in another direction. I wonder how seriously the people of Carlton take that expression. Do the people in that town ever notice their sign when they leave or enter the community? Does it have some kind of subconscious effect on them? Do they really believe that "everybody's somebody"? Whatever the sign does for them the people of Carlton, Georgia have my vote for the prize-winning town slogan.

The Christian Church, it seems to me, ought to have something like that in its descriptions of itself. Indeed, in the community of faith that claims to place Jesus the Christ at center every person is somebody. Every person is somebody created in the image of God, loved infinitely by God, redeemed by God, and guided toward Christ-likeness by the living Spirit of God.

James, the brother of Jesus and writer of the material we are following this month was nicknamed “James the Just” because early church fathers considered him to be filled with righteousness and purity. Often he is called Just James as a play on words that indicates that he was “beneath” his brother Jesus in importance. When I see the title Just James, I think of James’ humility and practical approach to things.. That humility is revealed in the lesson today.

James poses a situation. Likely he describes something he witnessed, just as Jesus used an event he witnessed in the temple to tell the story of the Pharisee and the publican at prayer. James was head of the church in Jerusalem until his death in 62 CE. For about thirty years he presided over a movement trying to understand itself in the world and to grasp its mission. At first the members of the Jesus movement expected Jesus to return very soon so they sold their possessions and lived a communal lifestyle to await his arrival. When Jesus did not return, the church, already impoverished, faced a bleak future. Poverty, along with rising persecution from Jewish and Roman leaders, made life very precarious. Naturally, with so many poor persons in the group, the arrival of a person of wealth was greeted with excitement.

Here's the scene James depicts. The lesson is on treating all persons alike and steering clear of all forms of partiality. Two persons come into the assembly of the Jesus followers. One is a well-dressed man with gold rings on his fingers; the other is a poor man in grimy clothes. The tendency within the church as well as in the world is to show deference to the rich man and to place the poor man to the side. If one shows respect for the wealthy individual and not for the poor man, what does that demonstrate?

I have seen this happen. In order not to get into trouble I will use an old example. In the community where I grew up a man who owned a large factory in Laurens had a "country house" with a pond and a field for horses and cows. Often he and his wife spent the weekend in that house and came to our small rural church. The two of them were very fine people who wanted no recognition. Yet when someone saw them driving into the parking lot the ushers were alerted to bring them down to the third pew. There everyone could see that they were in our church and, I suppose, they wouldn't have far to walk if they wanted to respond to the invitation to join the church.

Well, what does that mean? At least, according to James, deferring to the rich or the powerful is foolish. They, he writes, are the ones who oppress the poor, who drag persons into court. But worse, James teaches, showing partiality is contrary to the spirit of the Christ.

Simple lesson, isn't it? Do we really need to spend our time on something so obvious? I think we do. Partiality or discrimination is not dead. We like to think that we have moved past racial discrimination, but our society is filled with

discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, and economic class. We separate persons based on appearance, dress, artistic tastes, and political affiliation.

Judging on any of these bases is detrimental to the church and to us. This kind of attitude takes a superficial approach to understanding people. It violates the “royal law” of love that says one is to love his neighbor as himself. Most dangerous of all, it might make us miss the coming of the Christ in our midst. Again, echoing the words of Jesus, James says, “Listen, my dear friends: has God not chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and possess the kingdom?”

Jesus once said, “Blessed are the poor, for they have the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the hungry, they will be filled. Blessed are the meek, they will have the earth.” I do not believe that God chooses favorites. My faith is that God loves all persons equally. But I find it deeply fascinating that the Bible makes a special case for the poor. Maybe only those who see their need listen to God.

James’ point is that every person, rich or poor, is a child of God. We need to recognize that. Charles Williams, the English writer, suggested that when we walk down the street, we are to imagine that there is a host of angels in front of us, and everyone we meet. The angels cry out, “Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God.” If everyone, Williams said, could perceive that reality, everyone would walk with a sense of being adequate and loved and would see divinity in everyone else.

One night Dorothy Day who served the poor in the worst parts of New York City opened the door of the rescue shelter she ran to see a woman in rags looking for a place to stay. Dorothy Day said, "We're already full, but come on in. You can sleep with me." Her associate Catherine Dougherty took her aside and said, "Don't you see that that woman is in the last stages of syphilis?" "No," Dorothy responded, "I can only see the image of Christ."

If each of us saw the image of Christ in each person, then everybody would be somebody! It wouldn't be bad to live in an environment where everybody's somebody, would it? Or, is that just a slogan?

J. William Harris
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